

DeLay Helped GOP Track Missing Tex. Lawmakers

By Juliet Eilperin

Washington Post Staff Writer

May 23, 2003

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) acknowledged yesterday that his office called both the Federal Aviation Administration and the Justice Department to help track down 51 Texas House members who fled the state to derail a GOP congressional redistricting plan.

The Texas Democrats left Austin on May 11 to prevent the state House from establishing a quorum and taking up the GOP plan, which would have created several new Republican-leaning U.S. House districts. Texas House Speaker Tom Craddick (R), trying to force the Democrats back to Austin, asked DeLay for help in locating the plane of former state House speaker Pete Laney (D), which some lawmakers used to reach Ardmore, Okla.

A DeLay aide gave the Laney airplane's tail number to the FAA, which subsequently reported where the plane had taken off and landed -- which is public information -- DeLay's office said yesterday. Craddick also asked DeLay to contact the Justice Department to see how the Republicans could force the lawmakers' return, DeLay staffers said.

Some Democrats have suggested DeLay improperly involved federal agencies in a partisan spat limited to one state. DeLay told reporters yesterday that he called the Justice Department to ask "about the appropriate role of the federal government in finding Texas legislators who have warrants out for their arrests."

Rep. Martin Frost (D-Tex.) questioned whether DeLay had hoped to spur Justice officials to help Craddick's effort. "That's not an innocent call," he said.

DeLay spokesman Stuart Roy said the majority leader was clarifying with Justice officials what Craddick could legally do to secure the Democrats' return. "The speaker of the Texas House asked him to find out what their available options were to find lawmakers who had warrants out for their arrest," Roy said.